

"A Different Kind of King"

Christ the King Sunday
The Reverend Glenn E. Ludwig

8:15 and 11:00 a.m. Sunday, November 21, 2010
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

Luke 23:33-43

Once upon a time a great king decided to share his wealth with his subjects. He had a spacious compound created in front of his castle and marked it off with a large fence. In the compound he placed all his treasures; at its center he positioned his throne. He sat down and called his subjects together.

The king announced: "I am about to share all of my treasures with you. Choose whatever you wish in this compound, and it is yours. Choose wisely, and do not leave the area until I have dismissed you."

His subjects began to scramble over his possessions, taking whatever they wished. In the hubbub, an old woman, small in stature and great in years, approached the king to ask: "Your majesty, have I understood you correctly? If I choose anything in this compound, it will be mine?" The king assured her that she had understood and invited her to choose wisely.

The old woman paused for a moment in thought. Then she looked hard at the king and said: "Your majesty, I chose you!" The crowd grew silent at her words, waiting to hear the king's response. The king smiled at the woman and said: "You have chosen most wisely. Because you chose me, all of my kingdom will be yours as well." And it is said that there was abundant joy in the land that day, for the old woman was much loved, and everyone shared in the king's treasure.

This old fable gives us a starting place today as we gather to celebrate the last Sunday of the Christian calendar, Christ the King Sunday. We do, indeed, join today around a King, who summons us as well to share in the treasures of his kingdom. But today's picture is one very different from that first tale. We gather around our King who sits not on a throne of power in the midst of his kingdom, but who watches from the perspective of a cross. That is not the kind of throne anyone in this world would expect. But, you see, our King is not like any king before or since. The King we come to worship, to gather around, who calls us to share in the treasures of his kingdom, is a King with the ultimate power over life and death, for he is The Christ, the chosen one of God.

Jesus of Nazareth didn't look like a king as he hung bleeding and dying on that Black Friday of long ago. And it seems an ill-chosen scripture to use as our Gospel text this day as we try to bring to a close this church year. After all, didn't we just hear this lesson on Palm Sunday? Why point us back to the cross? The Romans knew it as an instrument of death. It certainly didn't look like a throne to them. The religious leaders in Jesus' day, the soldiers, and one of the criminals mocked Jesus as he hung there. "King of the Jews," they laughed. "He saved others, let him save himself," they taunted.

Little did they know that in their mocking they spoke the most eloquent of truths, for this is the one, the King, who would save others by his very act of self-giving on that cross. This is the one, the King, promised to his people of old in the words of Jeremiah heard

moments ago: "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land." This is the one, the Shepherd-King, the world, and we, were promised. This is the one, the King, who so loved the world that he gave what it needed the most – himself, a savior. This is the one, the King, who would be a servant-king.

Yes, this story of a king is different from our opening fable. It is different from every story we could ever tell about an earthly king, because this king offers what no one else can -- victory over death and the grave, freedom to live our lives in the sure and certain hope of a life to come, new life now freed from worries about the future, forgiveness to start every venture with a clean slate, salvation from everything that would try to knock us down and keep us down in this life. Yes, this King is different, for his throne is set on a hill overlooking the world his Father created, and from that throne-cross he gestures to all who stand, sit or kneel before it and says: "You are mine. I choose you and call you to be my children. Come into my kingdom and enjoy the treasures I have for you."

And what a kingdom it is -- like no other we have ever seen, heard of, or known. It is the very Kingdom of God which this one has been proclaiming throughout his life with story after story, beginning his tales with "The Kingdom of God is like" – like a man who finds a priceless pearl, or like a woman who tears the house apart looking for a lost coin, or like a father who joyfully welcomes back a lost son. It is a kingdom where love and forgiveness are the order of business each and every day. It is a kingdom where the meek and the lowly and the hurting are at the center. It is a kingdom where life is lived in all its intended wholeness, not in the fragmented forms with which we are so familiar. It is a kingdom where hopes and promises come into shattered and broken lives, where broken relationships are mended and dashed dreams find fulfillment; a kingdom where the lion and the lamb lie down together and where people learn to live in the peace the Creator always intended for his creation.

The Kingdom of God which we celebrate this day comes with all the power to change our lives, to remove the disillusionments about what we thought would bring us joy and contentment, to speak to the deepest fears and anxieties we know, and to give life meaning beyond what we have tried so desperately to give it. And the sign of that kingdom among us remains the cross where our King offered up himself for us.

Where is that kingdom, we ask? Let's let another old folktale point the way. Once upon a time there was a poor man who grew weary of the corruption and hatred that he saw around him everyday. He was tired of the constant bickering he heard and the loneliness he saw in the eyes of those he knew. His family and friends listened as he spoke passionately of his desire for a city where justice was honored, where personal wholeness could be found, and where peace reigned openly and proudly. Night after night he dreamed of a city where heaven touched earth.

One day he announced that he could wait no longer. He packed a meager meal, kissed his wife and children, and set out in search of the kingdom of his dreams. He walked all day and just before the sunset, he found a place to sleep just off the road, in the forest. He ate his sandwich, said his prayers and smoothed the earth where he would lie. And just before he went to sleep, he placed his shoes in the center of the path, pointing in the direction he would continue the next day.

That night a sly fellow was walking the same path and discovered the traveler's shoes. Unable to resist a good practical joke, he turned the shoes around, pointing them in the direction from which the man had come.

Early the next morning the traveler arose, said his prayers, ate what remained of the food he had brought, and started his journey by walking in the direction his shoes pointed. He walked all day long, and just before sunset he saw the heavenly city, the kingdom he had longed for, off in the distance. It wasn't as large as he had expected, and it looked strangely familiar. He entered a street that looked much like his own, knocked on a familiar door, greeted the family – and lived happily ever after in the kingdom of his dreams.

Do you see? The kingdom of God is not somewhere else. It is here, where we live, in our hearts and minds and souls. It is not found away from conflict and confusion, or failure and need. It is found wherever our lives are shattered, wherever our heads are hanging in shame and sadness, wherever our hunger is deepest, and our joy the most profound. It is found in a simple meal of bread and wine offered with words of promise and hope. It is found where Christ, the King, meets us with a cross and bids us follow him.

AMEN.